

"WHY A METHODIST?"

TEXT: "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you".

(I Peter 3: 15)

INTRODUCTION

Two things seemed to come together in my mind this week that pushed me in the direction of today's sermon. Why a Methodist?

First, we have a number of people in this congregation who come out of a non-Methodist Church background. Some of them are thinking of strengthening a tie with the Church at this time. In conversations with some of them the question "what's Methodism all about" often surfaces. "Tell me about the Methodist Church. Tell me about this Church".

The second thing had to do with a conversation I had recently with a person who is living temporarily at the 92nd Street "Y". A Methodist in background, this young lady said that some of her Jewish friends at the "Y" were curious about her Church. "What's a Methodist" they seemed to be asking. "Why are you a Methodist?" And she confessed, as most of us would, that she wasn't as strong in providing an answer to them as she felt she should be. As Peter said, "Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you".

DEVELOPMENT

"Why are you a Methodist?" Let's work this question around for a little while this morning. Different answers would be offered by individuals in this congregation.

Recognizing that we're Christians first and Methodists second, let's think about some of the answers we would probably here. One might say, "Well, because my parents were Methodists...and my grandparents, too." Nothing wrong with that answer. It's a good one in that it says something about the dedication of one's parents and grandparents. My parents were Methodists. My father was a preacher of the Methodist Church up in the Albany area of the Troy Conference. My grandfather was a Lay Preacher of the Wesleyan Church in Yorkshire, England, an evangelical Methodist group.

Or, one might tell about a program of activity at a Methodist Church - youth, choir, Sunday School - which started a person toward the Methodist faith and way. Or, he might tell of a girl he met who was so attractive that he wanted to be with her at all times, including church-times, too. In my case, the girl I married was a Presbyterian - a Southern Presbyterian...and they're tough to change. Eventually, she saw the "light". Not that she wanted to be with me at church-time. Professionally speaking, it looked better if she came my way.

Some might say, "well, it was the Church nearest to where I lived" - which reminds us of the influence of proximity. Some might say, "I shopped around the neighborhood, but was drawn back to the Methodist Church by the warmth and friendliness of the people....they made me feel at home." - which speaks well for a Church that is open to receive newcomers. You could add other reasons.

But I want to tell you why I'm a Methodist and I want to use different kinds of reasons. I do this not to criticize anyone else's church, but rather to strengthen my own members in their churchmanship and also to let new friends here

know a bit more about the United Methodist Church. Let me suggest three reasons.

WHAT THE METHODIST CHURCH IS DOING

First, I am a Methodist because I believe in what the Methodist Church is trying to do - to be that channel through the ministries that Christ Himself would carry out if He were here in person...so that they may be done for Him in today's world. Methodism truly wants to be His body on earth and to do in His name the sort of things He did.

Well, you ask, what did He do? He helped people. He went about doing good. There were sick people. He made them well. There were crippled people. He taught them to walk again. He fed hungry people and taught the ignorant and visited the lonely. He spoke God's word of love and forgiveness to those caught in the web of sin and despair. And Methodism tries to do that, too. She has homes and hospitals and schools, ministries in the inner cities and in Churches all over the world speaking Christ's word of hope and redemption and of new life.

I know that in her zeal, our Church makes mistakes along the way. But when I think of this, I remember a great baseball player by the name of Babe Ruth. His record for home runs in a baseball season of 154 still stands. (I know my baseball facts; I know that Roger Maris hit 61 but remember that was for 162 games). Babe Ruth holds another record, I believe, one that still stands. He holds the strikeout record, too. But no one every suggested that he be put out of the game because he struck out so much. He swung at many bad balls, as they say, but he hit a lot of home runs.

And our United Methodist Church may swing at some bad balls from time to time and make a few errors or mistakes along the way, but through her ministries she also hits a lot of home runs. There are times in the life of an institution just as in the life of a person when good intentions become a substitute for good judgement. We need to remember this here in a local Church like ours where we sometimes wonder what happens to the dollars we send out to the Church at large, or when we read in the papers as we have recently about the action of the higher levels of the Church on some particular issue or in some other part of the country. or the financial problems of...

I believe the Church can afford to be wrong, but it cannot afford to be irrelevant. Methodist is trying to live for her Lord, trying to do what Jesus would do if He were on earth in person today.

There's far more to our Church than what we experience here in this local congregation on any given Sunday. I believe in a connectional Church that has a vision - a world vision, a vision to help and to heal in places other than just here. It takes very seriously that word from the Gospel:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

FREEDOM IN METHODISM

When I am a Methodist because I cherish the freedom my Church gives me as an individual. I can think and act according to my understanding of God's will for my life. This is a freedom that extends over the entire Church.

It extends to the pulpit. There is no platform in all the world more free than the pulpit of a Methodist Church. The appointive system of our Church polity provides for this. Methodist preachers are not called; they are appointed. The congregation does not control the pulpit. And those who make the appointments do not either. This is one of the great traditions of Methodism - the tradition of a free pulpit. With that freedom, of course, comes a tremendous sense of responsibility.

But if the pulpit is free, the pew is too.

In other words, you are not now, nor ever have been, nor ever shall be required to agree with the preacher or anyone else to be a Methodist. When you joined this Church, you made no doctrinal commitments above the roots of the tree of faith. You were not required to accept any bonds on your life, either. The historic question that a person is called to answer when he joins a Methodist Church is wrapped up in this simple inquiry:

"Will you be loyal to this Methodist Church, and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?"

God has given you a mind with which to think, a will which directs your actions, and a heart with which to feel the needs of the world. God intends for you to use these and not allow them to become enslaved to anyone other than Himself. I cherish that freedom. Within the Methodist family there is a certain amount of elasticity, theologically speaking. We are not put into "theological straight-jackets".

We believe in the doctrine of the Incarnation, that God was at work in a special, unique way in the Christ-event, "reconciling the world unto Himself".

CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Finally, I am a Methodist because I hold to the basic idea of Methodism, that to know God - to experience Him in Christ, is far more important than it is to know and to hold any of the doctrines around which so many Churches develop.

Methodism's emphasis, growing out of John Wesley's life, is on Christian experience. It has been freely said that she is not a "doctrinally-oriented" Church. Some may consider this a weakness; I regard it as a strength.

Last July, on one of those hot, sticky Sundays, there were two visitors from Charlotte, North Carolina in the congregation. They were making notes on the sermon and did this on the bulletin which they left behind in the pew. I recall picking up the bulletin and found this comment: "Typical Methodist sermon...practical, related to life". Her friend's scribbled comment was, "Yes, darn it". I'll take it as a compliment... "practical, related to life". But be careful what you write on the bulletin 'cause sometimes they do get back to me, like the Sunday a little scribbled the question and handed it to her daddy, "How much longer is he going to go on...I'm getting hungry".

Either a person knows God, or he doesn't. If you do know Him, then you have a starting point from which His will can become your motivating power. And if you don't know Him, then you have a worthy goal.

Methodists do not ask, "Are you saved?" or "Have you been saved?" Rather, we would ask, "Do you want to know God, to experience Him as He speaks to us through Jesus Christ?" And we say:

"If you want to know God, then give us your hand. And together we will try to experience Him. We will study His word, pray together, service Him through the Church.

And we believe that somewhere along this path of fellowship, of study, or service, of prayer, we will be enabled and empowered to walk 'The way of Jesus' all of our days".

When you come right down to it, isn't that what it's really all about? To "Walk the Jesus way". That's what we're trying to do. We may never have a complete system of religious doctrine neatly worked out in our minds. I know I have a lot of question that some day I will ask my maker. 'Till then, I'll have to remain open. Have faith. Believe. We will never know in this life all that there is to know about God and about His disclosure of Himself in Jesus, whom we call Lord. But we can experience God through Him and this is sufficient.

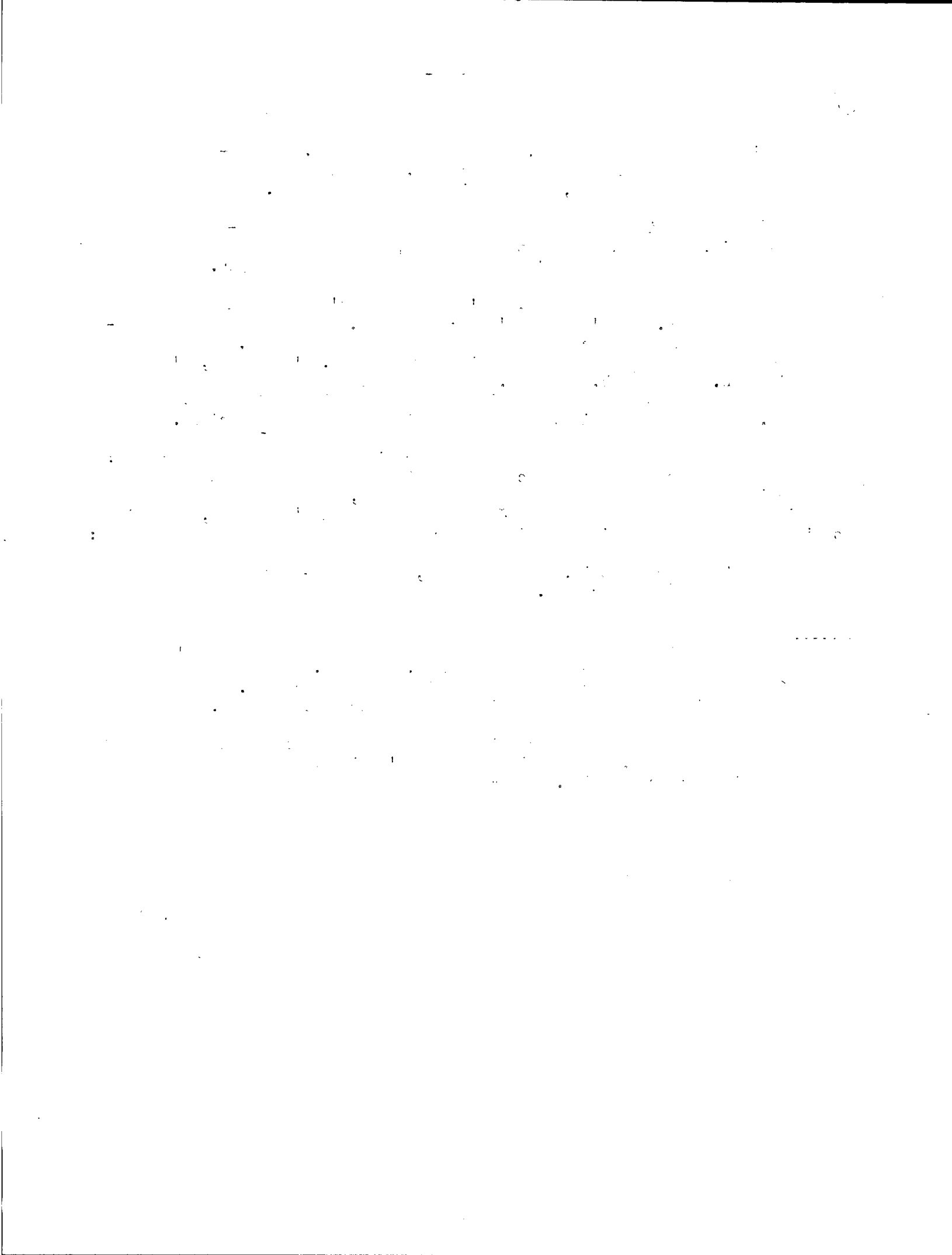
~~Do you know God?~~ Do you feel a tug in your life to want to experience Him? Can you make your judgements and decisions within the framework of His word and teachings in the Bible? If you can and if you do, then perhaps these words of invitation passed down to us from John Wesley, Methodism's founder, will find lodging in your heart and in your life and bring you in closer to this fellowship:

"If your heart is, as my heart is, then come - give me your hand."

PRAYER

Move in our hearts and in our lives, dear God. Make us to feel your nearness in these moments in this sanctuary. Confirm within us the feelings and the decisions we make.

Help us to deepen our commitment to You as we meet you in Christ Jesus. For in Him we see life's highest hopes and its deepest meaning. Amen"



INTRODUCTION The week of toil has ended. The day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. May it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light!"

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction."

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good courage and He shall strengthen thine heart."

"They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary. And they shall walk and not faint."

"For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. As you did it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it unto me."

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you".

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole."

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers for others, as well as for ourselves.

Touch with healing, O God, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

Ruth Frame. Harriet Kelm...cherished members and friends of our parish.

(over)

.....cherished members and friends of our parish.

Comfort the bereaved and the broken-hearted among us. Abide among us as a healing benediction.

In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News:

We are forgiven!

Will you all pray with me for: the hostages being held captive in Iran, their families. Let us also pray for the people of Cambodia suffering from famine and pestilence.

Grant them courage and hope.
Make them receptive to the touch of the Holy Spirit.

Answer the unspoken prayers offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray:

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

I wish to announce that Christians for Cambodia are planning to stage a peaceful demonstration tomorrow morning at 8:30 am at the Dag Hammorskjold plaza, at the UN, (1st Ave. and 45th Street). Invitation is extended to all, but especially to those of you are are involved with Concerned Christians for the Boat People. Tomorrow morning at 8:30 at the UN. Dag Hammorskjold Plaza.

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Also, in connection with Cambodia, there will be an EMERGENCY CONFERENCE ON THE CAMBODIAN CRISIS this coming Saturday, November 17th, at 1 pm in Riverside Church.

Again, the public is invited. and hopefully some of you will be able to attend.